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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIAN PM CONSIDERING PRO-ACTIVE OPTIONS ON
ERITREA, SUPPORTS KENYA'S JUBALAND INITIATIVE

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Classified By: CDA Roger Meece for reasons 1.4 b/d.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles told visiting AF/DAS Wycoff and CDA on November 19 that he wanted to give the USG a "heads up" that Ethiopia was considering actively supporting armed Eritrean opposition groups if the international community fails to take action to isolate Asmara. Wycoff questioned providing such support, noting the USG's interest in regional stability. On Somalia, Meles said the Government of Ethiopia (GoE) has recently informed Kenya of its support in principle for Kenya's Jubaland initiative and has agreed to share relevant intelligence. On Ethiopia's forthcoming elections, Meles pledged that the rule-of-law would be the bedrock that both assures free and fair elections and deals with any groups that seek to undermine the process. He complained that Diaspora money has too much influence in determining the relative strengths of opposition parties, although he added that implementation of a law restricting foreign funding of NGOs would allow for exceptions on a case-by-case basis. When asked, he justified the continued imprisonment of opposition leader Bertukan Midekessa as necessary to demonstrate that Ethiopia has no "twilight zone" between the legal and the illegal. After expressing understanding for the ramifications of further inaction, Meles said he would look into apparent GoE-imposed obstacles to delivery of U.S. military equipment and supplies as well as re-examine the GoE's stance on Leahy vetting requirements.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY CONTINUED. Wycoff agreed that Eritrea has shown no signs of changing its behavior but suggested that the broadening discussion of sanctions, including Ambassador Rice's personal involvement at USUN, has caught the attention of Eritrean President Isaias. Wycoff added that the USG has worked to undercut support for Eritrea, including his own visits to Gulf countries to enlist their support in such activities as well as their active support for Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG). He said the U.S. is opposed to Kenya's so-called Jubaland initiative, given the complexities of Somalia. Our concern is that efforts to implement such an initiative would backfire causing even greater instability. On the elections, he said the USG recognizes the signing of a preamble to an electoral code of Conduct as a valuable step and would be looking now to the orderly registration of political parties and individual candidates. He also advocated that all parties, including the government, should work to create an environment that was conducive to the participation in the elections process by all other parties. He said the U.S. views the role of civil society as crucial to democracy and that it was natural for the USG to promote the role of non-governmental organizations in Ethiopia. The Charge noted that DAS Wycoff's visit was intended as a signal of USG intent to follow up substantively

on the November 5 bilateral talks in Washington to intensify U.S.-Ethiopia relations on several fronts. He also told Meles of his forthcoming departure from Post. Wycoff held an on-the-record press conference with domestic and international press, where he highlighted the comprehensive nature of the bilateral agenda and USG concerns about the reduction of political space and the importance of a free and fair elections process in Ethiopia. END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) Visiting AF/DAS Karl Wycoff and CDA Meece met with Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi for 90 minutes on November 19. Meles was joined by Chief of Cabinet Birhanu Adelu. The USG was also represented by pol/econ counselor and deputy counselor.

Ethiopia Looking at More Pro-Active Options on Eritrea

14. (C) Prime Minister Meles raised Eritrean misbehavior several times. He said Ethiopia is convinced that Eritrea realizes it cannot destabilize Ethiopia before the latter's May 2010 elections and so has decided to target its destabilization efforts for the period just after the elections. (NOTE: The 2005 Ethiopian elections themselves were relatively calm, but post-election tensions stemming from vote-counting disputes triggered violence and widespread government reprisals. END NOTE.) He said Ethiopia's response to Asmara's efforts to destabilize Ethiopia, Somalia and, more recently, Djibouti and Yemen has been almost exclusively passive but added that he wanted to give us a "heads up that we are looking at options." He said, "We would be happy to stand down if developments outside the area obviate the need to become more pro-active."

15. (C) Making clear what international community actions

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would persuade Ethiopia to stand down, Meles expressed particular disappointment that the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has not taken action to impose a sanctions regime on Eritrea. He urged the U.S. to redouble sanctions efforts and especially to reconsider targeting remittances as what he called a "key instrument" for pressuring Asmara. Citing as examples his own Amciti, ethnic-Eritrean cousins, he said, "If the U.S. were to insist that paying taxes to Asmara is a felony, it would be easier for them to resist the tax. The Diaspora could say, 'We can't pay you.'"

16. (C) DAS Wycoff questioned providing support to Eritrean anti-government armed groups, noting the USG's interest in regional stability. Wycoff agreed there is no evidence that Eritrea has showed improvement in its behavior, although he added that President Isaias had recently undertaken something of a charm offensive targeted at European diplomats, a possible indication that he may be considering options. Wycoff assured Meles that the U.S. remains committed to achieving a UNSC sanctions regime against Asmara and continues to broaden the discussion beyond the P3 and Uganda with a hard push by USUN. He said the USG was also expanding efforts to undercut support for Asmara, noting for example he had been sent on a trip to Cairo, Riyadh, Jeddah and other cities both to promote efforts to undercut flows of support to Asmara but also to seek concrete support for Somalia's TFG. He said he has observed that some EU member states, formerly more supportive of Eritrea, have come to accept that Eritrea is playing a seriously negative role in the region and that the UK now believes that Eritrea has become a significant threat to its own domestic security.

17. (C) Pressed by Wycoff to describe the "pro-active" measures being considered, Meles said one option would be to directly support opposition groups that are capable of sending "armed propaganda units" into Eritrea. Meles said that the groups with the most capability to operate inside Eritrea are those "that you don't like from the lowlands, like the Keru" who he said would be "much better able to

survive in Eritrea." (NOTE. The Keru are a primarily Muslim ethnic group most of whose members live in Eritrea, although a minority live in Ethiopia. END NOTE.)

Somalia: Ethiopia Offers Kenya Support on Jubaland Policy

18. (C) PM Meles revealed that the GoE recently held meetings with Kenyan officials regarding Kenya's Jubaland initiative involving the training in Kenya of ethnic Somalis to return to Somalia's south in order to fight Al-Shabab. He said that he understood that A/S Carson had pressed Kenya to brief Ethiopia on this Kenyan initiative after it had been broached with the USG. Meles stated his thanks to the A/S for his role in ensuring that Ethiopia was consulted on this sensitive issue. He said the GoE had offered support in principle for the initiative and had offered to share relevant information, especially in connection with the vetting of ethnic Ogaden recruits. Wycoff stated unequivocally that the USG thought this initiative was a bad one and that it held more risk of worsening Somalia's stability than helping. Wycoff also noted that Kenya had little experience in executing such initiatives. Meles agreed with Wycoff's concern that Kenya has no history of successfully implementing this kind of program and has shown no evidence of the political will necessary to sustain the initiative, especially in the complex constellation of clans found in southern Somalia. Wycoff said the USG finds it more likely that the initiative would backfire and has expressed this concern at multiple levels of the Kenyan government. Meles said he shares this concern and added another -- Kenya seems to have the money to launch the initiative but not to sustain it, a concern he said he had felt it prudent not to express to the Kenyans. Nevertheless, he is impressed that Kenya has done a good deal of groundwork to prepare the initiative and said frankly that Ethiopia wants to ensure that the Ogaden National Liberation Front does not benefit from the training, an eventuality he feels Ethiopian involvement could help obviate.

19. (C) DAS Wycoff made clear that the U.S. does not consider Kenya's initiative to be productive at this point and intends to stay away from it. He urged Meles to consider that the TFG has achieved some tenuous viability because it is to a large extent home-grown rather than imposed from outside Somalia. Meles countered that the TFG must move forward or it will sooner or later move backwards. He said many observers are alleging that TFG President Sharif is a Wahhabi Muslim, but he has decided Sharif deserves the benefit of the

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doubt. Less personally, he believes the Kenyan initiative presents a pragmatic opportunity to support the TFG and he intends to embrace it because the alternatives to the TFG -- Al-Shabab, Hisb al-Islam, etc. -- are much worse. As a bottom line, he said he believes the Kenyan program could weaken extremists in Somalia.

110. (C) Meles said the TFG's primary problem is lack of cash in that the \$400 million pledged by donors in Brussels and elsewhere is being used to finance NGOs in the region instead of paying TFG troops. He complained that neither the Saudis nor the Gulf States are giving money. He said the U.S. alone is directly financing the TFG and is keeping it afloat. Some internationals, he continued, want to start the Djibouti Process over again -- a sentiment he understands given the waste of resources committed by the previous TFG president but dismisses as counterproductive today. He said the TFG is developing a budget and that IGAD intends to help raise the funds needed. He urged the U.S. to push other donors to make direct contributions as we have done. Wycoff noted that the USG has also pressed the TFG to develop a budget, transparent budget process, and focus on developing a capability to govern, including providing services.

111. (C) Wycoff acknowledged that Ethiopia will have a role to

play in Somalia, including in facilitating a TFG-Al Sunna Wal Jamma alliance (ASWJ), but urged Meles to play its role with discretion in order to avoid Ethiopian involvement serving as a recruiting tool for Al-Shabab. Wycoff added that the U.S. is also urging the TFG to form a strategic alliance with ASWJ.

Rule of Law to Deal with Those Who Would "Discredit the Process"

¶12. (C) Wycoff acknowledged that U.S. and Ethiopian officials had held "fulsome discussions" in Washington on November 5-6 and characterized his visit as a clear signal that the USG would follow up aggressively across the full range of bilateral issues. He said he would be meeting with key actors in the Ethiopian electoral process -- including the National Election Board of Ethiopia, the minister of communication, and opposition party leaders -- and would urge them all to facilitate full engagement in the process. Wycoff noted that it was incumbent on all parties to create an atmosphere that was conducive to participation in the elections by all other parties. Wycoff praised the signing by four major political parties, including Meles' ruling EPRDF, of a preamble to an electoral code of conduct as a positive step, adding that the U.S. would be very attentive during the imminent "crunch time" for the legal registration of political parties and individual candidates. He told Meles the U.S. views the role of civil society as very important to the democratization process and expressed concern about recent Ethiopian legislation that would limit the capacity of Ethiopian civil society groups that receive foreign funding to engage in political advocacy and conflict mitigation.

¶13. (C) Meles straightforwardly defended the legislation, saying Ethiopia also welcomes the role of civil society but suggesting that Ethiopia defines it a bit differently than does the U.S. He said civil society groups should be domestic and should be funded domestically, from the members of the groups themselves and other Ethiopian citizens. He added, however, that once the ongoing re-registration process concludes for domestically funded groups, waivers from the new law's funding restrictions will be considered for other groups on a case-by-case basis. Wycoff replied that the U.S. would be watching this registration process closely and urged Meles to consider a flow of money between the American people and the people of African nations, including Ethiopia, to be a natural consequence of the role of civil society and relations between our peoples.

¶14. (C) Meles pointedly criticized the Ethiopian Diaspora, especially its U.S. members, for launching "a massive campaign to ostracize opposition parties who take part in the process." Obviously referring to the continuous involvement in the code of conduct talks of the opposition "All Ethiopian Unity Party," Meles said, "One party changing its view doesn't mean there aren't tougher nuts to crack." He said, "We will assume that all political parties participating in the elections are doing so legally, but the rule-of-law will apply and those parties looking only to discredit the process will be addressed."

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¶15. (C) Wycoff raised the continued imprisonment of opposition leader Bertukan Midekessa, and Meles replied at length. Recounting the familiar history that Bertukan had joined in a group request for pardon after convictions stemming from the violent aftermath of the 2005 elections, Meles characterized her later disavowing of the pardon request as an attempt "to prove there is room in Ethiopia to operate in a twilight zone between the legal and the illegal, and we had to prove her wrong." He said he had "expressed frustration" with European Union representatives recently because, in his view, they insist on reacting in just the way

Bertukan wants rather than persuading her that she need not be in prison.

Meles Open to Expediting Military Supplies,
Less Helpful on Leahy Vetting

¶16. (C) Wycoff announced that AFRICOM Commanding General Ward and DASD Huddleston would soon be arriving in Ethiopia in follow-up to the November 5 talks and suggested that the U.S. would like to dispense with two problems, apparently of a procedural or technical nature, before those visits. Wycoff explained the nonwaivable Leahy Vetting requirements that must be met before the U.S. can provide training or equipment to foreign militaries, assured Meles there is no U.S. attempt to direct equipment to particular individuals or units, and said there nevertheless seems to be a reluctance on the part of the GoE to allow that vetting. Charge Meece explained that shipments of military equipment were backlogged in Djibouti because the names of Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) officers to whom the equipment would be delivered had not been submitted to the USG for Leahy vetting. Meece described the second problem as another backlog in Djibouti, this time involving a cement shipment, destined for a DOD project in the Ethiopian town of Arba Minch, that is languishing for lack of Ethiopian paperwork.

¶17. (C) Meles said he would investigate the Leahy vetting obstruction, but added that the problem is likely that Ethiopia sees the DOD/ENDF cooperation as institutional rather than personal and may be further compounded by the fact that the equipment is likely not assigned by the ENDF to particular units. He asked whether the equipment could be transferred to a second unit, after being delivered to a first, at ENDF discretion. Wycoff replied that vetting requirements, once met, might not preclude such transfers but would have to be addressed on the basis of each specific case. He was aware of cases where such equipment transfers had been approved in other countries.

¶18. (C) On the Arba Minch issue, Meles said, "We'll see if we can find a shortcut." (Note: On November 20, Meles advisor Birhanuto called CDA to suggest that the embassy submit a note verbal on the matter directly to the minister of finance, bypassing the ministry of foreign affairs, and said that the problem should then be solved. End Note.)

¶19. (C) CDA Meece ended the meeting by assuring Meles that the U.S. hopes to intensify relations with Ethiopia on several fronts relating to defense, elections, intelligence, and more. He also announced his own forthcoming departure from Post. Wycoff noted that the gap in having a permanent Ambassador in Addis was purely a matter of assigning the best possible person to the job and should not be perceived as a political signal of any kind.

¶20. (SBU) Wycoff held an on-the-record press conference with domestic and international press, where he highlighted the comprehensive nature of the bilateral agenda and USG concerns about the reduction of political space and the importance of a free and fair elections process in Ethiopia.

¶21. (SBU) DAS Wycoff cleared on this message.
MEECE